

# Obituary: Eulogy for Mary Ronnie (1926-2023)

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Allison Dobbie



***Farewell to Mary Ronnie, the first woman national librarian in the world when she was appointed head of the National Library in 1976. Thank you to Allison Dobbie who delivered this eulogy at Mary Ronnie's funeral and has kindly allowed us to share it.***

## **Paying tribute to Mary Ronnie**

Today it is my great honour to pay tribute to Mary Ronnie as a legend of the library world. Miss Ronnie as I first knew her. I will try to do this in my own words and with the help of other people and organisations that Mary worked with. However, it is simply not possible to do justice to the breadth and impact of Mary's career in libraries or to her legacy which continues strongly in so many services and in all of us.

I have worn my handknit stranded colourwork cardigan in special tribute though.

I first met Mary in the spring of 1969 as a 7th former when I applied for the Dunedin Public Library scholarship. This supported students through their university studies and library school so that we would then return to work at Dunedin Public. Mary met me and welcomed me very warmly. She showed me all around the Carnegie Library, introduced me to lots of people whom we chatted to, and we had a cup of tea. I was concerned after I left because I hadn't been interviewed. So you can imagine my surprise when I received a letter awarding me the scholarship a couple of weeks later. Of course I had been interviewed, it was just that Mary had done it her way, as she did instinctively in so many aspects of her leadership. We would see Mary every day in the library, she would stop and chat and we would always share with her what we were working on and how things were going. This was long before "walking the floor" became an official and sometimes awkward management practice.

Mary instilled in her staff a strong belief in the importance of public libraries and a set of values relating to equity and service that she inherited from her predecessors – W.B. McEwan (a Scot), Archie Dunningham and Ada Fache, and she passed these on to us with equal passion. These values also had their roots in deeply held Scottish beliefs about education and human rights which were part of Mary's DNA.

As Sally Angus says in her online tribute, Mary was way ahead of her time in the highest ideals of customer service. We were there to serve the customers, the people who owned the library, and to make it easy for them. We never pointed – we walked with the customer and made sure that we understood exactly what they needed and how we could help them. We were thoroughly trained, mentored, tested and partnered before being let loose on the reference desks on our own, and the accuracy and thoroughness of our research mattered.

Mary was way ahead of her time in so many other areas. She cared deeply about the library collections and about making every cent of limited budgets count in terms of ensuring that collections were of high quality and met customer needs, and were properly displayed. She was innovative and introduced a number of ground-breaking services and systems, especially in relation to community outreach. She was particularly proud of the first computer-generated listing of the library's magazine holdings, a huge awkwardly shaped document which was a first for Dunedin City Council and a remarkable feat involving thousands of punch cards. This was but the first of many forays into adoption of new library technologies in her subsequent roles.

She implemented clear succession plans for the future. She had a clear vision and a powerful ability to communicate and persuade. Town Clerks and Councillors were in awe of her and thought her formidable. She was mischievous and canny, and irreverent when necessary. At her farewell before leaving to take up the role of National Librarian, she said of the public service 'there is only one rule, and that is don't read the rule book.' A practice I have tried to follow but largely failed.

I wanted to paint the picture of these strong characteristics of her leadership that I experienced at DP because they are evident throughout her career. Along with dedication – total dedication and love for the role and the people she worked with.

### **Let me go back to the beginning**

Mary arrived in Dunedin from Glasgow in 1937 with her mother and brother. Her father had died around 1932 when Mary was 6. She loved reading and loved books, sometimes more than she liked going to school. She started working as an after-school assistant in 1942, then as an assistant in the Commercial and Technical Room when she left school and in charge there from 1946. Following part-time study for a BA and a year at library school in Wellington, Mary returned to Dunedin Public Library in 1952 as Head of Lending and then became Head of Adult Services in 1960. On the eve of her departure to Glasgow in 1960, she was appointed Deputy reporting to Ada Fache, and assumed this role on her return in 1961 until the retirement of Miss Fache in 1968 when Mary was appointed City Librarian.

As City Librarian, Mary's momentous achievement was her planning, advocacy and dedication which resulted in Council approval for a new City Library building at 230 Moray Place. Incredibly this was achieved while at the same time Mary was also President of the Library Association and a member of the University of Otago Council.

While the construction and relocation of the new building was not completed until 1981, Mary laid the groundwork and was heavily involved in its design. I recall a summer day sitting in some sort of book caravan in the Octagon when Mary arrived suddenly and flung herself into one of the chairs. She had just left a meeting in the Town Hall. "We're in a pickle," she said. "The architect has just realised the mobile library won't fit. Don't tell anyone." Then she disappeared and somehow, she must have ensured it was fixed, because both mobile libraries move in and out of the lower basement perfectly well.

The long-standing friendship and trust between Mary and Sir A.H. Reed were also notable and have been significant factors in the unprecedented donations and bequests to Dunedin Public Library over many years. Mary was a frequent visitor to Sir A.H.'s home, often to return with further treasures for the collection. She described such visits with much delight, including the ever-present pot of porridge on his stove, and she always made a special effort to make Sir A.H. welcome amongst his collections in the library. Notably, in his nineties, he could bound up the stairs at a faster pace even than Mary.

### **National Librarian**

In 1976 Mary moved to Wellington to take up the role of National Librarian, the first woman to be appointed to the role in New Zealand. Subsequently it was found that she was also the first female National Librarian anywhere in the world. Before she departed, Mary told us she had ensured her service in local government would count as part of her public service and had worked out her pension eligibility in case she didn't take to Wellington. It was a big move because many of Mary's views in relation to regional services, services to schools and the Country Library Service differed from the National Library practice. The Otago Southland branch of the Library Association, especially with Archie Dunningham's influence, had always believed that a strengthened network of public libraries operating locally was better placed to deliver such services. All this is captured later in her book, *Books to the People*. Mary was delighted when I let her know that the LIANZA submission on the Future for Local Government, delivered just last month, was advocating for a strengthened public library role in relation to school libraries.

Anyway, as it turned out Mary thrived in Wellington and as National Librarian. The following tribute is from the National Library Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, I thank them and acknowledge the National Librarian Rachel Esson who is here today.

There is a photo gallery of former National Librarians on the third floor of the National Library building in Molesworth Street in Wellington. The photograph of Mary shows someone with character and a twinkle in her eye. Mary is remembered by those who knew her at the library as "a breath of fresh air".

She was a National Librarian who was deeply connected to the sector and actively participated in discussions concerning all parts of the sector not just public libraries. During her time she encouraged the Library to think strategically about the future of its services and the value they added

to their communities. Typically, she initiated an automation planning programme which over time became NZBN.

Debbie Roxborough from our Services to Schools team recalls Mary as a pragmatist who was passionate about libraries and reading, with an abiding interest in young people.

Debbie was a school library adviser, based in the Christchurch centre, and was asked to take Mary on some visits to school libraries. At the end of the visits, she asked Mary what she had found most interesting and was surprised when Mary said that it was the visits to schools whose libraries were not perfect but showed great potential. She said, 'People always take me to see libraries that are perfect, and what I enjoy seeing most are libraries that may not be perfect but are used and valued.'

Jock McEldowney's book about Geoffrey Alley describes Mary's time at the National Library as *"...important, not only because some longstanding problems had been tackled and at least opened up for discussion, but also because she had brought an outside perspective to what had become a somewhat inward-looking organisation."*

This engagement and openness to ideas is something that the library continues to aspire to today.

— Rachel Esson, National Librarian

When Mary left the National Library in 1981, aged 55, she was looking for new challenges, and by this time she had reconnected with Peter O'Connor whom she had known in her youth in Dunedin.

## **The Auckland years**

In July 1982 Mary started work as City Librarian for Auckland City Council, following in the footsteps of the equally wonderful and long-serving Bob Duthie. Again, she brought the same style of leadership and vision that she had displayed at DP, with a focus on developing staff training, succession planning and budget delegation. Auckland had some similarities, in particular strong collections and research focus, heritage collections and a Central City Library with building challenges. It also had many differences, in particular a network of branch libraries, a more political Council and significantly, a much more diverse population.

Mary's time as National Librarian had no doubt grown her awareness of the library and information needs of Māori and Pacific communities, as that wonderful photograph of her surrounded by children in Ōtara library shows.

Therefore, she took great pride in the move to make Māori material more accessible, and in reaching out to people who had come to New Zealand from the Pacific Islands. In an oral history interview, she also mentions appointing a Māori librarian and the installation of Māori carvings into the Central Library.

Her other main focus was to plan and supervise the relocation of library services within the newly expanded central library building to achieve a more modern form of customer service.

My thanks to David Verran who worked with Mary at Auckland City Libraries during this time and who as its official historian has helped me with this record from Auckland, which was well before my time there.

### **Research in Wellington**

In July 1985 an exciting new opportunity to work with Peter on a history of electricity generation in New Zealand proved too enticing and they left Auckland to return to live in Wellington. I occasionally bumped into Mary at this time, and it was clear that she was fascinated by this topic, keen to share what she had discovered. The Electricity Corporation history of electricity development in New Zealand was completed during 1987-88. Mary is not listed as an author, but she was heavily involved in supporting Peter, as shown in her papers from this time which are deposited in the Alexander Turnbull Library.

### **Role in LIANZA**

Mary was actively involved in the Library Association at branch and national level throughout her career. The following tribute is provided by LIANZA for me to read. Ana Pickering, Executive Director, LIANZA Te Rau Herenga o Aotearoa is here to represent the Association and pay their respects today.

Mary Ronnie was an astute and capable leader in the library world.

Mary was a New Zealand Library Association (now LIANZA) president from 1973 to 1974. Mary became a LIANZA Fellow in 1975 and was made an Honorary Life Member in 1986 in recognition of her distinguished service to the association. In her retirement she was an active LIANZA Murihiku committee member and writer about libraries. She was awarded LIANZA's John Harris Award for her book 'Freedom to Read', the 2008 Dunedin Public Library centenary publication, written while Mary was in her 80s.

Mary was a crusader for libraries, believing they needed to be made more attractive to all sectors of the community and she had no time for the librarian who hid behind a desk and piles of books.

She used these words on the centenary of LIANZA in 2010 using a comment from her presidential address in 1974: "It seemed clear then, and still does, that "unless the librarian is accepted as an authoritative professional figure, freedom to act will be restricted to the most trivial matters rather than extended to areas where knowledge and experience have outlet."

"And a word of warning from a Luddite – don't get too firmly behind a computer screen or your muscles might atrophy. People are better understood when visible and audible. Energy is still essential."

LIANZA President Kim Taunga adds this personal note about Mary. "She left a legacy for all LIANZA presidents to aspire to. A legacy of service and library professionalism and moving the profession forward. I absolutely remember as a library assistant the respect and awe the profession held her in, she would have been in her mid-60s then and in her prime."

Mary Ronnie will be remembered as a pioneer in the library world.

— Ana Pickering, Executive Director, LIANZA Te Rau Herenga o Aotearoa

## **Monash and Melbourne**

In 1987 Peter and Mary moved to Melbourne for another exciting new challenge. The following tribute is provided by colleagues and friends who worked with Mary at this time – Ross Harvey, Rachel Salmond, Brian McMullin and others, so I read this on their behalf:

Retirement at 60 held little attraction for Mary. In 1987 she was one of three new lecturers appointed to the Graduate School of Librarianship at Monash University in Melbourne. Two years later she became Head of the School and remained so until early 1992.

In challenging circumstances, as tertiary education in Australia was radically overhauled and as the School moved from one faculty to another, she oversaw, with her characteristic energy and good judgment, the expansion of its offerings. She was instrumental in establishing the School's archives and records programmes, which have had a significant impact on recordkeeping thought and teaching internationally. She also broadened the School's outreach within Monash, including through her own teaching into the university's nascent postgraduate public history program in the early 1990s.

Her enthusiasm for and advocacy of public libraries, already so well-known in New Zealand, inspired many Australian students who were working in public libraries in Victoria and encouraged many others to seek employment in that sector.

Of course, there was much more to her life in Melbourne – lots of Scottish country dancing and some very adventurous exploration of the Australian outback with Peter in his Toyota Troop Carrier four-wheel drive. When it was sold Mary became great friends with the young family who bought it, of course, and they continued to take her out on mini-adventures in it.

— Ross Harvey, Rachel Salmond, Brian McMullin and other colleagues and friends  
Those of us fortunate to be in contact with Mary during these years remember the vivid retelling of those stories of outback adventures, she loved them.

### **Return to Dunedin**

Following her retirement from Monash and return to Dunedin, Mary remained actively involved in her own research and writing, as well as the activities of the Dunedin Public Library and LIANZA, particularly the local Murihiku branch.

Mary was a prolific researcher, writer, teacher and speaker throughout her life – her papers in the Alexander Turnbull Library are testament to this. This did not stop after retirement and she remained active in publishing articles and books on libraries and librarianship, including *Books to the People: A History of Regional Library Services in New Zealand* (1993) and *Freedom to Read: A Centennial History of the Dunedin Public Library* (2008), among many others.

In addition to the LIANZA awards, Mary's impact and achievements in librarianship have been recognised through the award of the Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Medal in 1977 and her appointment as a Companion of the Queen's Service Order in 1982. In 2007 Dunedin Public Libraries awarded Mary the Library Citation, it is a wonderful tribute to her.

I was City Librarian here when Mary returned to live in Dunedin – you see the 1969 scholarship achieved its intended purpose twice in my case. Anyway, I was very impressed by Mary's integrity and professionalism at this time. Although it was clear she did not agree with everything that was happening in the public library, she never said so to me or in public, and she was always 100% supportive personally and in public. This can't always have been easy.

Bernie Hawke who has only just retired as Dunedin City Librarian has shared these memories which I read on his behalf:

For about a year into her work on Freedom to Read, Mary worked from the small office next to mine and while initially hesitant about intruding onto another 'City Librarian's' turf, she soon became comfortable and delighted about being back in the hubbub of a working library, being part of the passing office conversations, sharing coffee with staff and having a free reign over the building and its resources. This was a lovely time.

I remember a conversation with Mary while she was writing Freedom to Read when she came to the end of the physical Council reports in the DCC Archives and was somewhat flummoxed by the bewildering maze of digital files to work through. It was also around this time that we provided Mary with a laptop computer to complement her boxes of 5 x 8 cards. Naturally we provided her with all the help we could navigating the digital records, but regardless she would shake her head and comment on the difficulties of digital records for future historians.

Around this time, Mary also came to me with a special and unexpected request. During her movement around the library, she noticed that Archie Dunningham's former desk was upstairs in the McNab New Zealand Room and asked if she could use it (even though it was smaller and definitely not ergonomic like the newer ones). We of course said yes to this request.

Mary remained active in LIANZA, she continued to attend AGMs and special events. I remember a spirited discussion she had with Chris Szekely at a National Library event hosted in Dunedin for the 100th anniversary of the Alexander Turnbull Library. Mary also regularly attended DP events, Reed Gallery openings and literary events. She was delighted with the strengthened links with Edinburgh through the City of Literature designation and was an active supporter of the Dunedin Public Library Association, regularly attending member events and AGMs.

I remember personally taking Mary to the official opening of the South Dunedin Pop Up Library in September 2017, and she was beaming with satisfaction that this direction was eventually progressing.

— Bernie Hawke, former Dunedin City Librarian

## **In Conclusion**

How is it possible to sum all this up and do justice to a woman whose career spanned more than seven decades. I remain ever thankful to Mary for the opportunities and support she showed to me. There will be thousands of librarians of all ages in New Zealand and Australia that she has taught, or addressed, or worked with who can say the same. There are library services

everywhere that are better because of her innovation and influence and spirited defence.

We remember Mary for her unswerving passion, her belief in libraries and the freedom to read, her pride in her work, her inspiration, her support. The twinkle in her eye and the mischief.

She loved her work and she loved the people who worked in libraries.

We loved her in return. She is in our hearts and her memory and influence will live on. She is truly a legend.

Thank you, Mary, for everything. Go well. God bless.

Allison Dobbie delivered this eulogy at Mary Ronnie's funeral on 24 March 2023 at Hope and Sons Chapel in Dunedin and has kindly allowed us to share it here.